

Review: Smirnov V. A.: Political elites of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia: recruitment factors and structural dynamics

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REVIEW



Smirnov V. A. Political elites of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia: recruitment factors and structural dynamics. Monograph. Kaliningrad. IKBFU Publishing House, 2016.

Transformation of the post-Soviet space is a well-established and prominent topic for interdisciplinary research in Russia and abroad. The discussion is far from complete, and it is rather difficult to either examine its course or systemise relevant argumentation and analysis methodology. It is, however, possible to identify the key elements of the debate, especially on the issue of whether the transformation processes have finally been completed. Twenty years ago, commenting on the rapid development of transitology, Ralf Dahrendorf wrote that the decline of the East was final and the shift of Europe towards the West — irreversible.¹ Not only has this thesis not been corroborated but it has also become the focus of a heated discussion. And what about the Baltics? Although positioning themselves as the ‘new West’, they are but another iteration of post-Soviet space. Most post-Soviet republics set the course for the West in 1991—1992, which was declared the only option. Since then, only Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania did not deviate from this path, turning it into the core of their respective national projects. For them it meant ‘coming home’ rather than making a transition. Nevertheless, the result was quite surprising.

In the twenty-five years since 1991, they have not eliminated key elements of the Soviet model in either politics or the economy. In this context, the case of the Baltic republics of the former USSR, which became the Baltic States, is of special interest. The significance of post-Soviet transformation in the Baltics does not lie in the fact that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were the first in the Soviet Union to aspire for national independence and socioeconomic changes. This thesis is not beyond criticism. Unlike the republics of Transcaucasia and Ukraine, the Baltics started the search for a post-Soviet development model when they were part of the USSR. One must acknowledge that, despite serious problems, transformation processes in this region were more successful than in the other post-Soviet states in the period of 1991—2016. One of the aspects of this research problem is discussed in V. A. Smirnov’s monograph.

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¹ Dahrendorf, Ralph. After 1989: Morals, Revolution and Civil Society. L. : Macmillan Press, 1997. P. 161.

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The monograph was published very recently and the problem it addresses is still very relevant. This is explained by increasing attention to the Baltic region in general and the Baltics in particular. The period after 2013 is characterised by unprecedented changes in the political situation in Europe and the EU-Russia relations. Until today, the Baltics have attracted significant research interest, being the only post-Soviet republics to have become integrated into all key Euro-Atlantic structures. The policy of the Baltic elites towards Russia is also consistent. Its strong anti-Russian sentiment emerged long before 1991 and continued to grow in the 1990s. For instance, Lithuania's policy is based on the Strategy for Russia's Containment, first published in 2007 and renewed in 2014.

The study in question aims to examine the dynamics of emergence and functioning of elites of states that are close to Russia in terms of history and geography but alas, not politics.

The monograph analyses external and internal factors affecting vertical mobility, identifies key recruiting pools and mechanisms, and describes institutional aspects — including informal ones — of intra-elite interactions. The key research methods are position analysis questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The respondents included former presidents, speakers of parliaments, ex-ministers and prime ministers, prominent businesspeople, scholars, and political analysts from Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

The monograph is well-structured. The first chapter, 'Political elites amid social changes: Key trends', concludes with an interdisciplinary analysis of the subject, which also offers a historical perspective on the issue. The second chapter considers the emergence of power groups after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the evolution of relevant research approaches. The third focuses on the methods for studying political elites, primarily, the position analysis questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Further, the author examines the features of political elite recruiting in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia after 1991. Structural changes in the Baltic power groups and limits to vertical mobility in the conditions of ethnic 'encapsulation' in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia are analysed in the final sections of the work.

Dr. Smirnov is right to stress that ethnic encapsulation of Baltic elites suggests intensive intra-elite interactions within formal and informal institutions. Key trends and features of structural changes in the political elites of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia after the secession from the USSR are considered for the first time in Russian political science.

The work is based on relevant empirical material and takes into account the most recent theoretical findings. It is aimed at political scientists, sociologists, specialist in international relations, journalists, and a wide range of experts studying the problems of political development in the Baltics.

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